

August 29, 2009 - Murtha Sees First Hand How Stimulus Money has Helped Local Clinic

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By Michael Aubele

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Mary Angel made the most of the brief chance she had yesterday to bend the ear of U.S. Rep. John Murtha.

While shaking hands with the Johnstown Democrat outside the Community Health Clinic in New Kensington, Angel pleaded with the congressman to offer more assistance to the Fourth Avenue medical facility where she gets her care.

The clinic received \$650,000 this year in federal stimulus money and will get an equal amount next year. Clinic officials asked Murtha to visit so they could show him how the money is being used and express their gratitude.

Angel figured it couldn't hurt to make a pitch for added

support, telling Murtha how much the clinic means to community members, and suggesting that services should be expanded.

"I want the clinic to grow like it has been," said Angel, 50. "They offer top-notch care here, but they need to expand. I feel that one of the things they need is a lab."

Spending more than half-an-hour touring the clinic, Murtha seemed impressed with what the facility offers.

"You're on the cutting edge here," he said while walking through the area where dental care is offered.

"We want to provide the best of care to the poorest of patients," responded Wilford Payne, the clinic's interim executive director.

Payne said that as much as 60 percent of the clinic's patients lack health insurance.

When asked why clinic officials wanted Murtha to visit, board member Bill Hall said the primary reason was to "show him just how grateful we are."

Murtha asked Hall, "What has the (stimulus) money helped you do?"

"It has helped us survive," Hall said. He indicated the clinic was able to open the dental clinic and hire employees with the money.

A number of patients, employees and other clinic officials told Murtha stories about how much the facility has done for the community.

"This has been an absolute godsend for us," said Cheryl Duncan, 58, of Washington Township.

Duncan said she first sought care at the clinic several years ago when she lost her health insurance. She raved about the staff and quality of care she gets.

"I've never dealt with anyone here who wasn't pleasant," she said.

Julie Pater, 35, of Lower Burrell, shared her story about job loss and financial distress.

A former Alle-Kiski Learning Center instructor, Pater showed Murtha a recent Valley News Dispatch story that chronicled the learning center's financial problems.

She asked the congressman to do "anything he can" to help the learning center, the clinic and every other agency or service that relies on government funding to carry out its mission.

Pater said that when she lost her job, she lost her insurance and wouldn't be able to get medical care if it weren't for the clinic.

"This place has been so wonderful," she said.

